NASF in Twitter: An Entrepreneur’s Community of Practice using Electronic Networks of Practice.

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Abstract

A group of Navarrese business men and women have formed an alliance called NASF. The group is a Community of Practice (CoP) committed to fostering entrepreneurship within and beyond its local geographic borders. Contemporary CoPs are often extended to become Electronic Networks of Practice (ENP). NASF is an ENP whose online presence appears through individual contributions and community facilitators. The group is actively involved in social media campaigns. By using social media and appropriating information that circulates on it, NASF builds its identity. This manuscript presents the initial results of an ethnographic study of the group. The purpose of the study is to explore the mechanisms the group uses for sharing knowledge in order to start, support and grow businesses. The discussion presented in this manuscript is based on two years of monitoring group activity. A conventional content analysis was used to examine a subset of group tweets on Twitter in order to gain an understanding of the group and its use of social media to support the CoP.

Introduction

This article focuses upon a group of entrepreneurs from Navarre, Spain, called NASF (Navarre-San Francisco). Representatives from the community traveled to Silicon Valley, California, in December 2010 in order to learn from the “startup culture.” Within the context of the current economic crisis in Spain, NASF offers an interesting perspective on a regional attempt to address key economic issues and to alter the economic course of the province. NASF’s participants want to change the work-mentality of Navarre’s people and institutions reinforcing entrepreneurship. They are fearful of Navarre being excluded from the global network’s flow. “The global overwhelms the local-unless the local becomes connected to the global as a node in alternative global networks constructed by social movements” [2, p. 623].

NASF can be considered a community of practice, ergo, a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly [10]. NASF has been extended into an electronic network of practice [17] which also is connected to many other networks. Research that examines networks with both physical and electronic communications needs to consider the additional influence of the relations that develop between individuals and the physical network, as well as the electronic network [17]. Navarre’s as well as the Basque Country’s patterns of sociability have been researched for the last eighty years. The aim of this project examine NASF and its practices in order to better understand the online sociability of Navarrese entrepreneurs through the lens of traditional rural Basque social institutions and traditions.

The core NASF community was formed by 16 people, some of them entrepreneurs in technology fields. Others work as community managers, journalists or other disciplines related to communication. Since December 2010, NASF has organized more than 20 meetings in which anyone, upon previous notification, can present a business project. Those attending the meetings provide feedback with the aim of joining forces and bringing ideas into practice. On December 2011 nine NASF participants traveled to Israel, which they call the “startup nation,” visiting some of the companies that are located in this country (Google, Motorola, IBM, Technion, QMerce, OMEK, XTR3D...)

Santiago Cervera is a leader in the Spanish conservative party Partido Popular in Navarre. He is also one of the 16 original NASF pioneers. It is important to note that since this journey, two members of NASF’s core group have joined the newly formed Government of Navarra. Guzman M. Garmendia, is the General Director of Open Government and New Technology of the Government of Navarre. Marta Borruel, meanwhile, is Chief of Staff of the
Department of Health in the same government, whose president belongs to UPN, the Navarre regionalist branch of the Spanish Partido Popular. Nevertheless, NASF tries not to take political position.

Navarre is a geographic area divided by the border between France Spain. This manuscript focuses on the Navarrese region located in Spain which is officially known as the Chartered Community of Navarre. In 2006, the region had a total population of 601,874. Approximately one-third lived in the capital, Pamplona-Iruña, and one-half in the capital’s metropolitan area.

Despite its relatively small size, Navarre features stark contrasts in geography, from the Pyrenees mountain range that dominates the territory to the plains of the Ebro river valley in the south. Navarre is a mixture of its Vasconic, Trans-Pyrenean and Mediterranean influences. Spanish is the official language in Navarre, together with Basque.

The economy in Navarre has a relatively small bearing on employment but it has a significant sociological value and provides exquisite raw material for the agro-industrial sector. A network of small and medium-sized companies constitutes the region’s industrial fabric, but there is also a significant presence of production plants belonging to multinational corporations. The two most important sub-sectors in Navarre’s industry are: car manufacturing and machinery, and equipment. The process of developing the tertiary sector in Navarre’s economy is still not complete. Nonetheless, services to companies and retailing and property services (especially those in Health, Education, Public Administration and Social Services) are the most important branches of activity.

NASF movement wants to change Navarra’s people, institutions and organizations and work-mentality through praising entrepreneurship. They are fearful of Navarra being excluded from the global network’s flow. As the sociologist, Manuel Castells, stresses “The global overwhelms the local-unless the local becomes connected to the global as a node in alternative global networks constructed by social movements” (Castells 2009:26) As a result, in certain areas an appropriation and recontextualization of the “start-up culture” is becoming into the “entrepreneur culture.”

One of the main communication channels for NASF’s participants is Twitter. Through their tweets I want to analyze if NASF followers are promoting a re-imagining of the self, as Liliy Gershon claims neoliberal policies generate, or if this could be a fissure in the neoliberal discourse toward which Chantal Mouffe referred in her article Rethinking Political Community: “we are facing a big deficit of new vocabularies, and we are at a moment in which the hegemony of neoliberal discourse is so strong that it seems as if there is no alternative” . After following NASF, however, there is a clear fact: NASF understands entrepreneurship as the new medicine that will cure the current “economic crisis”.

Being literate in the new information technologies, and by extension in Twitter it might seem like the “great dividing line that separates modern civilized scientific thought patterns from those of ‘primitive’ ‘traditional peoples’” (Foley 1997:433), I would add, don’t use the internet. In the case of NASF, the adoption of the technology comes together with the appropriation of the discourse and ideology of the founders of it, the liberal ideology of Silicon Valley.

Social Media Literacy:

For the last two years I have been following NASF’s online life from Reno, Nevada. I have followed the group every time they have upstreamed a meeting, small-scale events, dinners, and field trip relating to entrepreneurial activities, and a constant but not too prolific online production are the main means by which NASF’s members communicate with one another. Many of this CoP’s participants have opened a profile in the most popular social media’s platforms such as, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Many have also opened a personal blog. I track not only events but primarily a small community of practice which does not have a governing body. As in other non-profit organizations, public value [12] is one of NASF’s main goals1 but individual networking is as important as the one mentioned above and each participant adopts his or her way to communicate online. Three people have been, on a voluntary basis, the main NASF facilitators on Facebook and Twitter, which serve as the primary media for online announcements and as a dialogue catalyst. To a lesser extent LinkedIn has also provided a forum for discussions.

The term “digital divide” refers to “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities.” The digital divide reflects various differences among and within countries [16]. Being literate in new information technologies might seem to be a way to cross the “great dividing line that separates modern civilized scientific thought patterns from those of ‘primitive’ ‘traditional people’” [7]. This may be especially true if learning a new technology involves

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1 See NASF’s Manifesto: [http://nasf.es/manifiesto/](http://nasf.es/manifiesto/)
the acquisition of a new literacy as is the case of the web 2.0.

**Twitter:**

*Twitter* is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, informally known as tweets. *Twitter* was created in 2006. The service has grown to 140 million users in 2012. This service has been described as the Short Message Service (SMS) of the Internet. Following Crystal’s *Language and the Internet* [7], *Twitter* shares some features with the chatgroups mentioned above. An analysis of NASF’s *tweet* grammar reveals certain characteristics in common with asynchronic chatgroups [4]. In most NASF tweets

“the analogy with newspaper style is compelling. Headlines which are idiosyncratic and ludic attract the reader, and make it more likely that their accompanying articles will be read. The same point applies to chatgroup messages. With so much competition for readership, the message which has the intriguing title is the one more likely to be picked up and responded to.” [4]

Most Spanish tweets’ syntax structure is simple. As happens in Spanish newspapers [5], some of the headlines lack the verbal nucleus of the sentence (mostly linking verbs, “verbo copulativo” in Spanish). In other cases, the original sentence is broken to create a noun phrase, helped by a colon. *Tweeting* in the present tense is the most commonly used practice. The limitation to only 140 characters reduces the use of adjectives and nouns, reinforcing verbs presence which prints action and dynamism to short texts.

*Tweet’s* grammar structure is similar to traditional newspaper headlines and since *tweets* are generally used to deliver information, a parallel might be drawn between such headlines and *tweet’s* grammar. By contrast, while traditional newspapers have provided a key platform for corporate, political and business advertising, *Twitter* seems to be the main platform for the self-business individual.

**Methodology and Data:**

The setting chosen for this article is the social network, with a focus on *Twitter*, an environment that I will analyze in greater depth in my dissertation by examining, the *retweet* behavior of NASF members within the context of the existing literature on this phenomenon. [11, 14]. In this article I have used a conventional qualitative content analysis, defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns [9]. In this regard, I have read all data repeatedly to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole. Then, I have read tweets and its links word by word to derive codes. As this process continues, labels for codes emerge that are reflective of more than one key thought. Codes then are sorted into categories based on how different codes are related and linked. These emergent categories are used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters [9].

One hundred and eighteen (118) twitter tweets sent to #NASF hashtag from October 18th to 26th 2011 were collected for the purpose of this study. During that nine day period forty-four different people participated in the #NASF hashtag community of which eight are women. Spanish ad Basque are he native language for most in the community. Most tweets are in Spanish. Occasionally tweets in English are sent among the #NASF hashtag participants. Most of the tweeters are from Navarre, where only a minority of the population use Basque as their first language. It is therefore not surprising that no *tweets* in the sample are in Basque. *Tweets* were divided into two main categories: Informational *Tweets* and Casual *Tweets*. Informational *Tweets* are those which have links attached to articles, videos, pictures and NASF own productions. Casual *tweets* are mostly messages of phatic communication with the aim of strengthening cohesiveness between NASF participants. The focus of this paper predominantly addresses Informational *Tweets*.

**Informational Tweets:**

The focus for this area is on tweeted and retweeted articles along with tweets from #NASF community members that combine and contextualize previous material.

Within the 118 *tweets* gathered, ten of them had attached links to articles, five of which are written in Spanish and another five in English. The main subjects are:

1. **Business information**(3 articles). The sources that have been collected are Spanish journals on economics with more liberal tendency.

2. **Information for business formation/strategies** (2 articles): One is written in English the other one in Spanish. The English article is an academic manuscript about a the effects of friend’s recommendations and general ratings on how online users make choices. The second article originates in a technological university from a Barcelona blog whose participants work on entrepreneurship, innovation and technology.
3. (4 articles): Two of the articles feature biographical sketches about some successful American entrepreneurs. Another article concerns the reasons “to go solo” in business in America, and the last one is about Spanish entrepreneurs who received awards from MIT. Two of the articles are written in English and the other two in Spanish. For the NASF community, the written language is inconsequential. However, for the community must be cognizant of language barriers it aims to expand its membership across international borders.

4. **Action/Ideology** (1 article): Written in English, this article presents the “Spanish Entrepreneur Manifesto” which draws upon multiple sources to describe ways to create a market that fosters creation and development of new companies, stimulate innovation and, manage talent. This news appeared at *The Next Web* which delivers an international perspective on the latest news about Internet technology, business and culture.

**Meta-NASF, or NASF own production,** is comprised of seven articles, all of them written in Spanish. As in the case of action/Ideology postings, meta-NASF articles cover the main subjects presented in the informational ones: Business, and the promotion of certain strategies and values such as action, collaboration, respect and creativity. The figure that encompasses *all of these* best practices and values is the entrepreneur.

The way in which information circulates is noteworthy. MetaNASF articles show how NASF appropriates a discourse that it is being diffused by publications such as Mashable.com which according to their information, “is the largest independent news source dedicated to covering digital culture, social media and technology. Mashable’s mission is to empower and inspire people by spreading knowledge of social media and technology.” NASF mainly collects information from business papers, primarily American. In turn, this information is reproduced in NASF’s social and NASF friendly mass media, as well. It must be taken into account that several NASF’s participants belong or used to be part of the Spanish information group *La Información* that originated in Navarre and now operates across Spain and takes a politically conservative stance.

Thus, information circulates within social media and sometimes it arrives to local mass media. The frenetic diffusion of, in this case, a discourse can be defined as *Meme* or *Spime*: “Spimes are manufactured objects whose informational support is so overwhelmingly extensive and rich that they are regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system” [1]. To illustrate this case, a *tweet* sent by a woman under the initials D. G. is included below. There is an attached a link to a short documentary about Israel. This *tweet* was often *retweeted*, owing perhaps to a recent trip to Israel organized by NASF.

> D. G. había un viaje, no? @EspírituNASF RT @csrlen Breve documental (12 mins) sobre Israel como "StartUp Nation" j.mp/s468q0 #nasf 20111026

This sort of discourse is common. It is extensively retweeted, serving to establish, support and reinforce the NASF community: “The repeating, recycling, and recontextualizing of media discourse is an important component in the formation of community because it establishes an indirect connectivity or intertextuality across media consumers and across instances of media consumption” [13].

One example is the “NASF News.” This newsletter (in *paper* format) is the product of the voluntary efforts of one of NASF’s participants. He chooses some *tweets* from NASF’s hashtag regarding to the link they have attached. In this way, the circle is closed: mainstream media or a blogger publishes an article about a group that promotes the startup culture, and then this article is *retweeted* by another community that promotes similar values. The next step is for the article to be published in an online newsletter by a member of the community. This in turn gives rise to a geometric progression of a discourse’s “metadiscourse”, a *Spime*, a *Meme*.

You need a transition from previous para. To this one. What is a text-trajectory>Next, I will show an example of a text-trajectory of an article in Twitter: first, the article is posted in a blog called *Emprende Capital Blog*, is then *retweeted* and selected for publication in NASF News.

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2 http://mashable.com/about/
Conclusions

Most of the tweets are sent in order to contribute to knowledge about entrepreneurship in the NASF Community of Practice, thereby showing a different reality which might be attainable. NASF and its member’s identity change participating in twitter and face to face meetings while adapting to the new communicative, economic and social circumstances. NASF, is formed by entrepreneurs who are very aware of their “personal branding” and business interests. The public representation they achieve through Twitter is an augmentation of their professional identity.

Adopting the tools offered by social media, NASF members stand out from the rest of Navarrese population and regard themselves as “the advanced” in Navarrese society. Thus, the adoption of the technology comes together with the appropriation of the discourse of “entrepreneurship”, or startup culture.

Bibliography